

University of Groningen

Dreams of passage

Mohkamsing-den Boer, E.; Zock, T.H.

Published in:
Religion

DOI:
[10.1016/j.religion.2003.11.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2003.11.002)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2004

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mohkamsing-den Boer, E., & Zock, T. H. (2004). Dreams of passage: An object-relational perspective on a case of a Hindu death ritual. *Religion*, 34, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2003.11.002>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



ELSEVIER

Religion 34 (2004) 1–14

RELIGION

www.elsevier.com/locate/religion

Dreams of passage: An object-relational perspective on a case of a Hindu death ritual

Elizabeth Mohkamsing-den Boer^a, Hetty Zock^{b*}

^a University of Nijmegen, Department of Anthropology, PO Box 9104, Nijmegen 6500 HE, The Netherlands

^b Faculty of Theology and Religion Studies, University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 38, Groningen 9712 GK, The Netherlands

Abstract

By examining the case of a death ritual in a Surinam-Hindu community in the Netherlands, the authors want to demonstrate the usefulness of object-relations theory in the study of religion. Because it focuses on the dynamic interaction between individual and culture, this psychological theory embraces a truly cultural-psychological approach. D.W. Winnicott's idea of 'transitional phenomena' is central in this respect. Cultural activities, such as participating in rituals and myths, are said to have a transitional function, when they sustain identity formation and coping with crises. Based on Arnold van Gennep's famous term 'rites of passage' as well as on the psychoanalyst Geza Róheim's insights into rites and myths of passage, the new term *rêve de passage* (dream of passage) is coined. Dreams may also have a transitional function in situations of crisis and change. As an example, we discuss the dream of one of the mourners in the case discussed. By using cultural meanings from her social and religious context—in particular, the notion of the *mahapatra*—the dream helps the mourner to cope with a difficult situation and to make the transition back to ordinary life. The article concludes that the concept of *rêve de passage*, as developed within the object-relational framework, is a promising tool for dream research in both religious studies and anthropology.

© 2004 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

This article is an interdisciplinary undertaking, combining psychology with the anthropology of religion. We will consider the case of a death ritual in a Surinam-Hindu community in the

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: e.mohkamsing@worldmail.nl (E. Mohkamsing-den Boer), t.h.zock@theol.rug.nl (T.H. Zock).

Netherlands.¹ In our theoretical framework we will integrate elements from the psychological object-relations theory—D. W. Winnicott’s theory of ‘transitional phenomena’ and Masud Khan’s theory of the transitional use of the dream-space—with Arnold van Gennep’s theory of *rites de passages* and Geza Róheim’s concept of *mythe de passage*. We propose a new concept: *rêve de passage*.

In contrast to Freudian drive theory, object-relations theory focuses on the relational aspects in development. Until now, the theory has been predominantly applied to religious behaviour in a Jewish and Christian context.² There are some exceptions: Buddhist meditation has been viewed from an object-relational perspective.³ In anthropological circles, object-relations theory—especially the idea of transitional objects—has been regularly applied. For instance, an issue of *Ethos* (March 1987) was devoted to ‘interpretation in psychoanalytic anthropology’.⁴ William Beers has used both anthropological and object-relational insights in his study of ritual blood sacrifice, which he links to male narcissism (see Beers, 1992). While anthropologists generally make a pragmatic use of object-relational concepts, we will elaborate here on the theoretical background. It must be noted that the terms ‘transition’ and ‘transitional’, used throughout this article, have slightly different meanings in anthropology and in psychology. By ‘transition’ is meant here the process of change from one state or stage in the life-cycle to another. For example, the wedding ceremony changes the bachelor into a married person, and birth changes someone into a parent. The term ‘transitional’ is used in the sense of object-relations theory, where it indicates an experiential bridging of the gap between subject (inner) and object (outer) world.

The first aim of this article is to show how object-relations theory applies to a non-Western case—here that of Hinduism. The second aim, in view of the growing interest in dreams in anthropological and religious studies in the last two decades,⁵ is to offer a new tool for the study of dreams in religion.

The case

The case presented here is based on the experience of the first author, who participated in a death ritual after the death of a cousin. For reasons of convenience, parts of this article will be written from the I-perspective.

My cousin was a twenty-year-old female, married for two years, who had lost her unborn child two weeks before she herself died. Her illness was unexpected and dramatic, and so was her death to the family. In the course of the death ritual, one of the family members shared a dream with

¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, Indians from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were contracted to work in Surinam, then a Dutch colony. At the time of Surinam’s independence in 1975, a majority of their descendants migrated to the Netherlands.

² See the pioneering study of God representations of McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1994; Rizutto, 1979; and Spero, 1992. For a discussion of the use of object-relations theory in a Christian context, see Zock, 1999.

³ See Finn and Gartner, 1992; and Kara, 1979. Kara points to similarities between the ego dilemma according to Buddhism, and the criticism of the subject/object cleavage in object-relations theory.

⁴ *Ethos* 15 (1987). For example, Herdt (1987) discusses Sambia initiation from a transitional perspective, and Poole (1987) adopts Winnicott’s idea of ‘transitional object’ in discussing children’s personal symbols among Bimin-Kuskusmin (Papua New Guinea).

⁵ See Jedrej and Shaw, 1992; Lohmann, 2000, 2003; O’Flaherty, 1984; Shulman and Strousma, 1999; Tedlock, 1987.

me which we will interpret as a ‘dream of passage’. It is not the ritual as such which will be central to our analysis but the dream as related to the cultural background.

My in-laws are Surinam Hindustani. My cousin’s family follows the Sanatan Dharm, known as the orthodox form of Hinduism. The husband of the deceased has one older brother, an older sister (sister-in-law 1) and a younger sister (sister-in-law 2). Through marriage, I am quite highly placed in the family hierarchy, as the deceased was the youngest daughter of a younger brother of my husband’s father. Within the culture, my husband is regarded as her eldest brother. But as one of his cousins is married to sister-in-law 1, he also is a brother-in-law to her family-in-law and a *barka dada* (eldest uncle⁶) to the small children of his cousin and wife. All the young women of the family refer to him as *bhai* (brother), or *barka bhai*. To all these young women he is, culturally, an eldest brother with all the responsibilities that go along with this status.

Short description of the death ritual⁷

Death, cremation and the cult of the dead are accompanied by a long series of ritual acts which serve to obtain the salvation of the deceased on the one hand and the security of the ones left behind on the other hand. These extended and very complicated rituals are described in the Vedic texts. The death rituals of Surinam-Hindus in the Netherlands are based on these texts but have changed through time. Until now, the rituals of Surinam-Hindus in the Netherlands have scarcely been academically described.⁸ Therefore we will have to rely on personal reports. Only a general overview can be given here.

Hindu death rituals take place over a relatively long period of time. This period can be divided into nine stages: (1) preparation for death;⁹ (2) rituals at the moment of death; (3) preparation of the body; (4) funeral procession to the cremation ground; (5) disposal of the body;¹⁰ (6) the rites concerned with the collection of the bones (or ‘ashes’) on the third or fourth day;¹¹ (7) the rites for the deceased’s spirit (*preta*), covering the period up to the twelfth or thirteenth day, when various ceremonies enable it to take on a new spiritual body and become an ancestor (*pitr*); (8) ceremonies marking the end of the impurity and the end of mourning, including the role of the

⁶ Dada actually means grandfather but in Surinam it is used for the eldest paternal uncle.

⁷ ‘In India there is a considerable variety in the way death rituals are performed, depending on caste, region and orientation of the priests, but also influenced by growing secularisation and urbanisation’ (Firth et al., 1991, pp. 52–3). Considering the difference in performance, the ‘Surinam roots’ and adjustment to Dutch conditions have enlarged this variety.

⁸ Publications are mainly in Dutch—for instance Rambaran and Ramsoedh, 1998; Van der Burg et al., 1990; and articles in *OSO*, magazine for ‘Surinamistiek’. There is some popular literature on Hindu rituals in the Netherlands, published by Stichting Lalla Rookh. Ramsoedh’s historical survey is an exception in English: see Ramsoedh, 1995.

⁹ This may be seen as a lifelong process, but often only starts when death approaches.

¹⁰ This for adults is normally by cremation. Burial is usual in certain circumstances, e.g., for sanyasins and infants, and water burial follows death from certain illnesses, for instance.

¹¹ These may be deposited in a holy river immediately after collection if possible, or as soon as the chief mourner gets the opportunity to go to the Ganges or Yamuna. In the Netherlands the ashes are usually deposited in the North Sea.

mahabrahman/mahapatra,¹² and (9) commemorative rites. The death rites must be ‘perfectly’ performed. Otherwise the deceased will forever remain a *preta* and will not be incorporated as a *pitr*.

In comparison with India, in the Netherlands situation there is usually an increased time lag between the death and the preparation of the body on the one hand and cremation on the other. In this case, however, the time schedule was closer to the Indian model. For hygienic reasons, the cremation took place within 36 hours. After the death of the girl, her body was washed and dressed by her sisters-in-law. Her husband conducted the rituals with the help of the priest (*pandit*).

From the cremation to the ceremonies ending the mourning (stage 8), the family, as customary, gathered every evening (for thirteen days) to recite verses from the Ramayana. Until the tenth day, the close family members have to live very soberly. The first ten days are a time of extreme impurity that also reflects the family’s isolation and grief. On the tenth and thirteenth days, final rituals are conducted to enable the *preta* (an unembodied ghost roaming between earth and heaven) to take on a new spiritual body and become a *pitr* (ancestor). On these days the ancestors, including the *preta* of the deceased, receive oblations.

The dream

Day by day my husband and I went to the recitation. Since the sexes were separated afterwards, I became quite close to our cousin’s sisters-in-law. During these moments, sister-in-law 2, who was twenty-two years old and unmarried, would repeat to me day after day how her little sister had suffered and how she, the sister-in-law, had accompanied her that last night in the ambulance from hospital to hospital, when no one was able to help, as her sister’s skin had burned away through fever. Later, she had to inform all the family members of her dying, and some hours later of her death.

One day my husband was too busy and too tired to go to the recitation, so my son, as a representative of his father, and I went alone. The next day, after the recitation, sister-in-law 2 and I were sitting next to each other in the kitchen as usual, regarded as a private place for women. She told me that she had had a dream the previous night and wanted to share it with me. ‘Last night I dreamt of *Bhai*. I dreamt that he was too busy to be with us in the daytime. He had been working all day, so that he could stay that night and do the wake and take care of our little sister and we could take some rest. I saw him that night watching over her, while we were all asleep’.

After the dream she seemed relieved. It was as if a great burden were taken off her shoulders. In the dream, the culturally most suitable person had taken the responsibility that had weighed on her so heavily.

¹² In India the Mahabrahman funeral priest presides over the rituals, which differ from region to region and from caste to caste. The ceremony used to end with a feast to the Brahmins, called the Mahapatras. Mahabrahman means ‘great brahman’. The caste is alternatively known as Mahapatra: ‘great vessel’. An actor is a *patra*, a ‘vessel’ for the qualities of the character he plays. In the drama of death the funeral priest is a vessel for the rancorous greed of the ghost (see Parry, 1994, p. 76). The Mahapatras used to receive all sorts of gifts that are supposed to be transported by them to the next world for the future felicity of the deceased (see Pandey, 1969, pp. 266–7). However, in the Netherlands there is no such subcaste. Therefore the *pandit* will conduct the rituals and, in general, fulfill the role and duties of the Mahapatra. The Mahapatra is often seen as the final link of the deceased with the world and, notwithstanding the role as vessel of rancorous greed, is seen as the final caretaker.

Theoretical framework: psychology

Object-relations theory

Recent development in psychoanalytical theory may be described as a relational shift.¹³ Instead of a one-person psychology, focusing on intrapsychic processes and biological drives, psychoanalysis tends more and more towards a two-person psychology, in which the intrapsychic and the interpersonal are combined. There is some disagreement about the question of whether the relational shift implies an outright paradigm shift or simply evolves from the classical Freudian drive theory. Anyhow, relationships (internal and external, real and imagined) rather than biological drives are considered to be central in psychological life. Important representatives of the relational approach include the British object-relations theorists, especially D.W. Winnicott and W.R.D. Fairbairn, and, in the USA, the later-generation ego psychologists, interpersonal psychoanalysts and the self psychologists in the line of Heinz Kohut. We opt for an inclusivist approach, combining insights from intrapsychic, interpersonal and object-relational psychological approaches.

Winnicott and transitional space

It is precisely this relational shift that makes psychoanalysis an interesting partner for the study of culture and religion. It leads to a truly cultural-psychological approach because it focuses on how persons relate to each other and to their cultural environment. How do people appropriate cultural traditions? What are the dynamics of cultural participation in individual and group life? To understand the dynamic interaction between individual and culture, Winnicott's idea of 'transitional phenomena' is very helpful. According to Winnicott, the process of self-development is essentially relational. There is a fundamental tendency towards realising the self in the object-world, by getting involved in the world in various ways: in relating to persons, nature, objects and also to cultural entities, such as religious traditions, philosophical systems and art forms. This so-called transitional activity takes place in a third, intermediate sphere between the subject and the object world: 'an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute ... a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 2).

A central characteristic of transitional activity is that it involves both subjective and objective elements. It is shaped by the individual's longings, experiences and fantasies, but it is no fantasy, no hallucinatory construction. The object-world offers the material for the experience, and complements and corrects the individual when the subjective elements threaten to take over. The preeminent criterion for determining whether an experience is transitional is whether communication about the experience is possible and whether it belongs to a *shared reality*,¹⁴ so that others can, to a certain extent, understand and get in touch with the experience. The first

¹³ See Aron, 1996; Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell, 1988; Jones, 1991.

¹⁴ 'If, however, the adult can manage to enjoy the personal intermediate area without making claims, then we can acknowledge our own corresponding intermediate areas, and are pleased to find a degree of overlapping, that is to say, common experience between members of a group in art or religion or philosophy' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 14).

transitional activity is that of the small child, playing with a transitional object—a teddy bear, blanket, etc. The child’s just-emerged and still-fragile self has difficulty keeping in touch with the object-world in the absence of the caretakers, particularly at moments of discomfort. The transitional object is now a symbolic representation of the trust-evoking and supportive experiences with the caretakers. Therefore it can help to maintain the child’s relationship with the outer world and may be comforting. Winnicott argues that it is of utmost importance for further development and realisation of the self—a lifelong process—that the individual keeps looking for transitional experiences. For it is only in this way that the individual can experience meaning: ‘to feel that life is real, to find that life is worth living’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 98). Creative activities in the sphere of culture later succeed the child’s transitional play with the teddy and help to maintain the often tensional relationship of the subject with the outside world, as well as to support the self in realising itself in the world.¹⁵ A necessary precondition for transitional activity is what Winnicott calls *the capacity for object use*. One must be capable of separating self from world. Only when one sees an object as different from oneself, with an independent existence, can one really relate to it, usefully integrating it into one’s life.¹⁶

Winnicott is primarily interested in the function of transitional phenomena in sustaining the process of self-realisation and the experience of meaning. Prominent here is a basic psychological capacity that might be summarised as ‘faith’. Note that a much broader concept than religious faith is meant here (see Zock, 1999, pp. 442–4). Winnicott speaks about trust, confidence, belief in (i.e., belief in reliability) as a prerequisite for self-realisation and functioning in the transitional space.¹⁷ ‘Faith’ means a trustful attitude, being open to involvement in the world. Winnicott does not go into theorising about the various manifestations of faith—in other words, how transitional experiences are brought about by religion, art, intellectual enterprises, etc. What counts for him is that a certain cultural tradition and the institution it represents, if present, leave room for a creative interaction between individual and tradition, thus furthering faith and allowing for transitional experiences. On the basis of Winnicott’s theory of transitional phenomena, psychologists of religion have developed theories about the specific functions of *religious* faith (see McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1994; Zock, 1999).¹⁸

¹⁵ Winnicott states that ‘an infant’s transitional object ordinarily becomes gradually decathected, especially as cultural interests develop’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 14). Of course, objects—for instance, pictures and statues—also play a role in the cultural sphere. The crucial difference between the child’s interaction with a transitional object and the adult’s transitional dealing with cultural objects is that the adult’s symbolic capacity is fully developed. The adult can separate self (fantasy) from object-world, which are still blurred for the child. To give an example, a child may be deeply convinced that his teddy is alive, does talk and experiences pain. By contrast, for a religious believer, celebrating the Holy Communion is a ‘real’ thing, but the believer knows that it is different from having supper at home.

¹⁶ ‘To use an object the subject must have developed a *capacity* to use objects’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 89).

¹⁷ Eigen characterises the transitional space as ‘area of faith’ (see Eigen, 1981).

¹⁸ Here we come across an important discussion, which, however, will not be pursued in this article. Our point of departure is Winnicott’s idea that religion may have a transitional function. It is interesting to note that recently Winnicott’s ideas about transitional phenomena have been applied in the study of arts, as suitable to trace non-religious, transcendent aspects in art (see Parsons, 2000; Rudnytsky, 1993).

Masud Khan and the dream-space

Winnicott did not pay much attention to dreams. His theory about the transitional space was however, taken up and complemented by Masud Khan's notion of *dream-space*. This is 'a specific intrapsychic structure' which Khan distinguishes from the biological act of dreaming and the process of dreaming (Khan, 1993b, p. 96).

The dream may now be considered as an 'object' in the sense of Winnicott. The individual can 'use' it in a transitional way or appropriate it so that it acquires a personal meaning. This appropriation happens in the dream-space. The capacity to use the dream-space is a transitional capacity.

In 'Dream Psychology and the Evolution of the Psychoanalytic Situation', Khan describes the features of what he calls a 'good dream'.¹⁹ One of the prerequisites is 'a capacity in the ego for symbolisation and dream-work', that is good-enough to sustain an experience of intrapsychic communication (Khan, 1993b, p. 91; see Winnicott, 1971, pp. 139, 141). By a good dream Khan means 'a dream which incorporates through successful dream-work an unconscious wish and can thus enable sleep to be sustained on the one hand and can be available for psychic experience to the ego when the person wakes up' (Khan, 1993a, p. 36). In a good dream an unconscious wish is expressed, so that the sleep is not disturbed. Personal conflicts come, symbolically, to life. This way they become available for transitional use.

Khan suggests that the capacity to *use* the dream space can only arise in a good-enough facilitating environment. At the start of life, this is even a *sine qua non* for growth and development (see Winnicott, 1971, p. 139). Later in life we also need the support of adequate environmental provisions. If the capacity to use the dream-space is lacking, persons will tend to act out their experiences in other ways, such as exploiting the social space in order to relieve nervous tensions.

In short, the dream-space is an intrapsychic area in which the dream is made available for transitional use (see Khan, 1993b, pp. 98, 99). As in the transitional space, in the dream-space an individual may develop 'the self' and relate to outer reality, through what we would call 'transitional dreams'.

Theoretical framework: anthropology

We will now combine the above psychological object-relational insights with those of Arnold van Gennep and Geza Róheim about rites and myths of passage. Their ideas inspired the first author in the development of the concept *rêve de passage* (see Mohkamsing-den Boer, 1998). It will be shown that dreams can also have a transitional function in transitions, thus combining the psychological and the anthropological view.

¹⁹ Khan enumerates fourteen features of a good dream. Only the one relevant to the present discussion will be discussed as it is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate on it (see Khan, 1993a).

Arnold van Gennep—rites of passage

In *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) Arnold van Gennep focused on ritual behaviour in its relation to the dynamics of individual and group life, since he realised that religious beliefs, as an integral part of societal life, could not be adequately captured in individualistic terms. He recognised the important influence on individual identity of a community's view of the supernatural. Ceremonies and rituals, he argued, need to be examined in their entirety and in the social setting in which they are found.

As is well known, Van Gennep concentrated on transition rites. Every person has to deal with changes of status and new phases in life that alter one's position in society. Van Gennep postulated a tripartite structure as the underlying pattern of transition rites, and distinguished three main ritual phases: separation, transition and incorporation. In his discussion Van Gennep included not only life-crisis rituals but also fertility and calendrical rites; rituals associated with territorial movements and thresholds; consecration rites; and rites of initiation into fraternities, cult groups, or high status as examples of (secondary) transition rites (see [Van Gennep, 1960](#), pp. 11, 49, 59, 60, 94). We will focus here on dreams accompanying transitions and transition rites.

Geza Róheim—myths of passage

In his pioneering studies, Geza Róheim succeeded in combining ethnology and physical and cultural anthropology with psychoanalysis, even if his psychoanalytic interpretations were sometimes controversial for both psychoanalysts and anthropologists. He was especially interested in the function of myths, and, in concurrence with Van Gennep, coined the new term *mythe de passage* (transition myth):

We have called these legends 'myths of transition', and have regarded them as functioning socially in harmony with initiation rites: the mythological material helps the young men to grow up, and to make the transition from Oedipus situation to marriage. But the Primal Horde is ex hypothesi a period of transition in phylogenesis from a pre-human to a human form of society. We should not forget that the myths themselves always purport to explain the existing order of things from something that has preceded, that is, they describe a transition. The essential theme is the relation of the individual to the object-world, and libidinal cathexis as the defense used by human beings to bear the object loss or separation. ([Róheim, 1945](#), pp. 16–17)

This passage shows that Róheim must be situated between traditional Freudian psychoanalysis and object-relations theory. On the one hand it is true that time and again he stresses the value of Freud's theories, and generally starts his exposés with a Freudian view on culture that is taken to extremes. On the other hand we come across ideas that seem to be precursors of object-relational thinking about culture. For Róheim, it is relationships that are central. Here we are far from the Freudian view of culture as a solution for the clash between drives and reality. Further, his discussion of myths and dreams as cultural objects anticipates Winnicott's concept of transitional object. For example: 'I have found the cultural object, i.e. the objects made by man have a double aspect. They represent the primary infantile object (parents) and the maker, i.e. the subject

himself'. Róheim calls this the 'intermediate object' (Róheim, 1945, pp. 99–100; see Winnicott, 1971, pp. 5, 13, 47). In his explanation, he first makes reference to Freud when he says that 'the cultural object or a sublimation is halfway between the narcissistic and the object-erotic position, a stabilisation point for the oscillation of libido' (Róheim, 1943, p. 97). He then goes on to remark that 'the great danger against which mankind has evolved culture is that of object loss, of being left alone in the dark ... its function is security.' (Róheim, 1943, p. 98). In particular, it seems that what Harry Guntrip has said about the yearning for a connection is very similar to what is described by Róheim, who states that all cultures represent attempts at protecting themselves from object loss.²⁰ Róheim stressed the function of myths and dreams in alleviating the tension caused by the fear of object-loss. While he saw them primarily in the context of defence mechanisms, we will extend Róheim's ideas in arguing that myths and dreams have a relation-seeking aspect as well. They are also ways to face and to get in touch with reality.²¹

Rites and myths as transitional phenomena

Van Gennep stressed a change in status as the ultimate aim of the rites of passage. We suggest that rites of passage do not merely aim at effecting a particular change in status by representing new activities and responsibilities and symbolising the transition. They also serve as transitional phenomena. In Winnicott's third, intermediate, sphere of reality (next to the subjective and objective spheres)—the transitional sphere—ritual and mythical activity take place. Rites and myths help to establish a more harmonious relationship between a subject and the subject's world. They stimulate involvement by showing individuals their place in their society, in the world, and even in the cosmos. This process helps to prevent us from succumbing to our primary fears of separation and isolation. Rites and myths also stimulate a creative interaction with the object-world. Through creative, transitional activity the initiate or myth audience learns how to deal with the new situation in the outside world, just as the child learns how to deal with the outside world through the transitional object (see Zock, 1997, pp. 37–8).

The function of transitional objects and transitional phenomena is not a transient one. Through transitional experiences a human being can experience one's life as meaningful and realise oneself. Like culture in general, rites and myths offer the possibility of authentic self-realisation.

Rêve de Passage

Dreams, like rites and myths, belong to the various ways in which the self becomes realised in the object-world and take place in the transitional space. We come now to the following description of *rêve de passage*.

The concept *rêve de passage* holds that these kinds of dreams accompany major changes in life, such as birth/parenthood, initiation, and marriage and death, and enable individuals to

²⁰ See Beit-Hallahmi, 1995, p. 259.

²¹ An article on Róheim's anticipation of, among others, the ideas of Klein, Mahler and, ultimately, Winnicott is in preparation.

facilitate, or to cope with, these transitions with the help of cultural or religious images. Dreams, like rituals and myths, can have a transitional function. Dreams can support important changes in life, and social and religious meanings drawn from the cultural environment may be creatively appropriated in the dream. Another, optional feature of a dream of passage is the double layer. The first layer, always present, concerns the personal situation of the dreamer and the personal consequences of the dream. The second layer, not always present, concerns the community, refers to the cultural and religious background, and implies social consequences of the dream for (part of) the community (see Mohkamsing-den Boer, 1998, pp. 75, 76). In close communities, as well as in small-scale societies, the function of dreams is twofold and the role of the second layer in a *rêve de passage* comes to the fore. Dreams are often used to conserve and strengthen the existing social order or are applied to authorise innovation and change. Sharing a dream indicates not only the quest for explanation or advice but also a shift of responsibility as well.

Application

Combining the two theoretical frameworks, we will show that the dream in our case has the features of a *rêve de passage*: it functions as a transitional phenomenon, helping the dreamer to cope with a difficult situation and to make the transition from the crisis to daily life. Here it concerns the death of a sister-in-law, to whom a lot of care and attention has been given in the period before her death. In transitional activities, the subject relates to a tradition that has been handed down from the outer world (e.g., society). This constitutes the ‘shared reality’ of a group, here the Sanatan Dharm. We will now show how.

The dreamer is a young woman who not only is grieving over her dead sister-in-law but also is burdened with a great deal of unexpected and unavoidable care and responsibility during the illness of this sister-in-law. The dream is created after the dramatic loss of a beloved one, which caused an emotional crisis. By way of the dream, the ‘crisis’ is recognised. There is no cultural expectation of a dream in this context.²² Nevertheless, the dream is perceived as important enough to be shared with an elder ‘sister’. The dreamer’s experiences are symbolised in the dream, which helps her to get a grip on the situation and to integrate the events into her life. In this sense, the dream might be called a psychic organiser (see Barkin, 1978, p. 532). The dreamer is socially well integrated. She has creatively used the available relationships as offered by her social environment. As Masud Khan and Barkin (see Barkin, 1978, p. 532) would argue, the creation of the transitional phenomenon, the dream, at this critical moment is an *indicator* that a certain level of ego-functioning has been attained. Her basic psychological capacities are well developed. At the same time the dream, as a transitional phenomenon, contributes to further symbolisation of the situation. The culturally related dream helps to cope with the emotional crisis and eases the transition to a new phase: it confirms the fact that her sister is dead and will not return, and the responsibility is lifted from her shoulders by way of ideas borrowed from her religious tradition. The religious myths and rites indicate the appropriate caretaker of the deceased. The final care of the deceased has been handed over to the most suitable person—the one who in the eyes of the

²² In some cultures people are expected to have certain dreams on the occasion of important transitions, e.g., the ‘spirit conception’ dream in Aboriginal Australia and dreams anticipating death in the Amazons.

dreamer is the eldest brother, who also is the most reliable person. The dreamer feels relieved and can get on with her life.

We will now further examine our *rêve de passage* with the help of the theoretical framework described. Let us first see whether we can find the same features that Van Gennep accords to rites and myths of passage in the dream.

A first feature that he notes is *revelation*. An initiation rite, for example, contains supernaturally revealed knowledge and instructions that must be conveyed to the members of a younger generation during the performance of that rite. The same goes for the information conveyed in a transition myth. Now what about our dream? The dreamer dreamed of handing over the care to a person who, in his role in the dream, refers symbolically to the *mahapatra*. According to this Hindu community, the *mahapatra* takes on the remaining negative karma of the deceased at the end of the death ritual, and is from that moment on the last connection with the world of the living. In other words, the identity of the *mahapatra* was ‘revealed’ in the dream. Of course, this interpretation is the dreamer’s own. In the Hindu-Surinam community the role of the *mahapatra* is generally taken by the priest.

A second feature is *secrecy*: the information passed on contains secret elements that are meant for only a selected group. Some rituals belong to the realm of initiated men or women only. Whether a myth, or only part of a myth, is revealed may depend on the phase of life of the listener. This feature only partly applies to our dream. It was told in a private place and was not meant to be shared. Yet it was no secret, as it concerned a public role of a public person, the *mahapatra*. As in rites and myths, however, there is a transmission of religious knowledge, some of which is private.

A third feature concerns the *tripartite structure* of rites and myths of transition: the sequence of separation, transition and incorporation. In telling a myth, both the narrator and the audience separate themselves from the outer world. They enter the realm of the spiritual, share or gain religious knowledge, and finally integrate this knowledge into their lives. The myth helps persons make the different transitions from one stage or status to another and to experience them as meaningful. This feature was present in the dream as well: the dreamer separates herself from the outer world in the dream-space. There she makes the acquaintance of the caretaker (symbolic *mahapatra*), who shows her symbolically how to transfer the responsibility and to make the transition. When she awakens, she is able to integrate this knowledge into her life (the aforementioned incorporation), which becomes relieved from the burden.

Second, we will examine whether the dream has a double layer. The first layer, which concerns the personal situation of the dreamer, is clearly present. The dream has a personal, affective function for the dreamer. But can we also trace a second, underlying layer affecting the social environment? At first sight the second layer seems missing, as it is primarily the dreamer who benefited from the dream by receiving emotional relief. However, the dream has social consequences as well. In the dream the position of the eldest brother as caretaker becomes clear, and by sharing the dream with his wife, the dreamer makes it known that although he is absent, she still recognises his authority and forgives him for his absence, since he had sent his wife and son. In close communities like this one, the network of hierarchy and communication is rather complex. On the one hand the brother’s absence must have aroused some disapproval. On the other hand there is understanding, as society is not prepared for these time-consuming rites (see Firth et al., 1991). By communicating the dream, the brother is honoured as if he had really taken

the priestly responsibilities and is acknowledged as a protector. At the same time the wife is reassured of her position and of the position of her husband, which was not subverted by his absence.

In conclusion, the crisis is recognised, comes to life in the dream, and is dealt with through the creative use of cultural and religious meanings. The anxiety and grief caused by the new situation are eased. The event of death is made part of the tradition as handed down from the outer world, is anchored in the social and communicative order, and becomes part of a shared reality. The dream functions as a successful transitional phenomenon, helping the dreamer's transition from mourning back to ordinary life by making life meaningful for her once more.

Conclusion

The concept *rêve de passage* implies, first, that dreams may accompany important changes in life, such as birth/parenthood, initiation, marriage and death, and may enable individuals to cope with or to facilitate these transitions. Second, the concept implies that dreams may have a transitional function. That is, by appropriating social and religious meanings in the dream, the dreamer can creatively relate to the dreamer's environment, and thereby self-realisation takes place.

In the case discussed, the object-relations offered by the social environment as well as by the cultural and ritual tradition proved to be good enough to handle the life crisis, not only individually but also religiously. The transitional dream was the creative outcome of this process. We have found a direct and explicit influence of the dreamer's culture and religion in this *rêve de passage*. Although the Surinam Hindu community has no tradition of dream-sharing, the cultural influences are conspicuous and certainly not deliberately inserted. So with the help of the concept of *rêve de passage*, we have tried to capture the relationship between the dreamer's culture and the content of the dream, as well as the function of this relationship in the personal crisis of the dreamer. Ultimately, we view transitional dreams as a sign of an integrated *self* and respect their role in the process of maturation.

We hope to have shown that the disciplines of comparative religion, anthropology and psychology of religion can fruitfully collaborate, and in particular that the object-relational approach is a useful instrument for further research into rites of passage—for instance, in baptism and in the *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. Further, we are convinced that the object-relational approach is of great help in studying and managing modern situations of 'uprooting'—for example, migration, pluralisation and globalisation, and especially rapid social change in small-scale societies. In the modern context, persons are more and more loosened from their familial, social and cultural context, and this loosening may result in social and psychological problems. The new concept of *rêve de passage* draws attention to the possible role of dreams here. Moreover, it is a promising instrument for the study of dreams in any context.

References

- Aron, L., 1996. A Meeting of Minds: Mutuality in Psychoanalysis. Analytic Press, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Barkin, L., 1978. The concept of the transitional object. In: Grolnick, S.A., Barkin, L. (Eds.), Between Fantasy and Reality: The Transitional Objects and Phenomena. Jason Aronson, New York, pp. 511–36.

- Beers, W., 1992. *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*. Wayne State University Press, Detroit.
- Beit-Hallahmi, B., 1995. Object relations theory and religious experience. In: Hood, R.W. Jr (Ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*. Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL, pp. 254–86.
- Eigen, M., 1981. The area of faith in Winnicott, Lacan and Bion. *International Journal for Psycho-Analysis* 62, 413–33.
- Finn, M., Gartner, J. (Eds.), 1992. *Object Relations Theory and Religion: Clinical Applications*. Praeger, Westport, CT.
- Firth, S., Killingley, D., Menski, W., 1991. *Hindu Ritual and Society*. Killingley, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Greenberg, J.R., Mitchell, S.A., 1983. *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Herdt, G., 1987. Transitional Objects in Sambia Initiation. *Ethos* 15, 40–57.
- Jedrej, M.C., Shaw, R. (Eds.), 1992. *Dreaming, Religion and Society in Africa*. Brill, Leiden.
- Jones, J.W., 1991. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Religion*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Kara, A., 1979. The Ego Dilemma and the Buddhist Experience of Enlightenment. *Journal of Religion and Health* 18, 144–59.
- Khan, M.M.R., 1993a. Dream psychology and the evolution of the psychoanalytic situation. In: Flanders, S. (Ed.), *The Dream Discourse Today*. Routledge, London and New York, pp. 29–49.
- Khan, M.M.R., 1993b. The use and abuse of dream in psychic experience. In: Flanders, S. (Ed.), *The Dream Discourse Today*. Routledge, London and New York, pp. 91–100.
- Lohmann, R.I., 2000. The role of dreams in religious enculturation among the Asabano of Papua New Guinea. *Ethos* 28, 75–102.
- Lohmann, R.I. (Ed.), 2003. *Dream Travelers: Sleep Experiences and Culture in the Western Pacific*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- McDargh, J., 1983. *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the Imaging of God*. University Press of America, Lanham, MD.
- Meissner, W.W., 1994. *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Mitchell, S.A., 1988. *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Mohkamsing-den Boer, E.P., 1998. *Les Rêves de Passage: The Dream as Transitional Phenomenon among the Australian Aborigines*. MA thesis, unpublished.
- O'Flaherty, W.D., 1984. *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Pandey, R.B., 1969. *Hindu Samskaras*. Motilal Banarsidass, Varanasi.
- Parry, J.P., 1994. *Death in Banares*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Parsons, M., 2000. The Dove that Returns, The Dove that Vanishes: Paradox and Creativity in Psychoanalysis. Routledge, London.
- Poole, F.S., 1987. Personal Experience and Cultural Representation in Children's 'Personal Symbols' among the Bimin-Kuskusmin. *Ethos. Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 15(2), 104–35.
- Rambaran, H., Ramsoedh, H., 1998. Concepten en praktijken onder Surinaamse hindoes in relatie tot de dood. *OSO* 17, 40–9.
- Ramsoedh, H., 1995. *The Institutionalization of Hinduism in Suriname and Guyana*. University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.
- Rizutto, A.-M., 1979. *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Róheim, G., 1943. *The Origin and Function of Culture, Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs*, New York.
- Róheim, G., 1945. *The Eternal Ones of the Dream*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Rudnytsky, P.L. (Ed.), 1993. *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Shulman, D., Strousma, G.G. (Eds.), 1999. *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Spero, M.H., 1992. *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical Integration of Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy and Judaism*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Tedlock, B., 1987. *Dreaming: Anthropological and Psychological Interpretations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Van der Burg, C.J.G., Damsteegt, Th., Autar, K. (Eds.), 1990. *Hindostanen in Nederland*. Garant, Leuven.
- Van Gennep, A., 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London. First ed., 1909.
- Winnicott, D.W., 1971. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, London.
- Zock, H., 1997. Religie als Transitioneel Fenomeen: Het Belang van D.W. Winnicott voor de Godsdienstpsychologie. *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 51, 31–48.
- Zock, H., 1999. Religion as the realization of faith: the conceptualization of religion in relational psychoanalysis. In: Platvoet, J.G., Molendijk, A.L. (Eds.), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*. Brill, Leiden, pp. 433–59.

Elizabeth Mohkamsing-den Boer studied Comparative Religion at the University of Leiden. Since 2000, she has worked as a junior researcher at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Nijmegen. Her research involves the function of dreams in oral small-scale societies—Australian Aborigines and Amerindians in Suriname—from the perspective of object-relations theory.

Hetty Zock studied Psychology of Religion at the University of Leiden. She has been teaching Psychology of Religion since 1994—first at the University of Leiden, and currently at the University of Groningen. Her research interests are Erik H. Erikson, object-relations

theory, and identity formation in a multicultural context. Her major publication is *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern. Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion* (Rodopi, 1990; 2nd ed. 2004). Other relevant publications include: 'The Hermeneutics of Life History—A Plea for a Hermeneutical Psychology of Religion', in: J.A. Belzen (Ed.): *Hermeneutical Approaches in Psychology of Religion* (1997); 'Religion as the Realization of Faith: The Conceptualization of Religion in Relational Psychoanalysis', in: Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk (Eds.), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion* (1999); and 'The Mercy of Anxiety. A Relational-Psychoanalytic Study of *Dialogues des Carmélites*' (together with Hans A. Alma), *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 4 (2001).